ORTER

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PRESS

Saturation Coverage

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A SWIFT KICK by an angry Iowa farmer at the shins of a New York *Times* reporter may well turn out to be a significant warning to the American press. It was delivered last month in a barnyard by Roswell "Bob" Garst, hopelessly cornered like a wounded bear by a pack of three hundred reporters and photographers as he tried to explain the facts of agricultural automation to his distinguished guest, Nikita S. Khrushchev. The kick was received with pained dignity by Harrison Salisbury, one of the *Times's* Pulitzer Prize correspondents. But for many observers, the kick was aimed—and justly aimed—at the press itself.

The press did not cover the Khrushchev story. It smothered the Khrushchev story. In the process, it distorted almost beyond recognition the America that Khrushchev saw, and by its very presence created other stories. On the same day Salisbury was kicked, the chief of the *Times's* Khrushchev task force, James Reston, said: "They [the reporters] are not the obscure witnesses of history, but the principal characters in the drama, whose very presence is so ubiquitous that most of the time Mr. Khrushchev is addressing them, or addressing others with them in mind."

The truth is that in this Golden Age of Communications, whenever the press participates massively in history it changes history, and it thereby abdicates its role of reporting the news in favor of actually making the news. Whenever the press deploys to cover a story in depth, the sacred right to know is trampled in an undisciplined scramble by hundreds of reporters and photographers for "knowledge" which certainly all of them do not need and which many of them do not even use. In the scramble, false images are created (which part of the press thereupon often innocently criticizes), new dimensions are artificially added, and the true place of the story in history is changed. The story becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible to cover honestly.

The Khrushchev tour was but the latest eruption of this potentially fatal sickness. There were symptoms at the Geneva Conference of April, 1954: more than a thousand reporters angrily fighting each other for fifty copies of a trivial Chou-En-lai statement; more than three hundred reporters (most of them American) changing a North Korean press conference into a sterile political debate. There were different symptoms at Little Rock, where the massive presence of the press drastically changed the Little Rock story, if only by involving local citizens more than they would normally have involved themselves. But in the Khrushchev tour, the press turned against itself as it never had before, and in more different and destructive ways.

No journalist interested in the future of his calling, already widely described as "the diminishing profession," can fail to see the danger signals strewn in Khrushchev's wake. Here, for purposes of identification, is a list of these danger signals.

The "D-Day" syndrome: This is the easiest to spot—and the hardest to cure. Assignment sheets become battle plans, complete with maps and precise schedules drawn up weeks in advance. Wire services assign fifty-man combat teams to a city, and countless smaller patrols are sent out by major newspapers. Networks put more than five hundred broadcasters, telecasters, and cameramen in accreditation uniform. Reporters are deployed like troops, sped from battlefield to battlefield in escorted convoys, moved from theater to theater in special planes between midnight and dawn.

The real danger in the "D-Day" syndrome's elaborate paraphernalia is that to justify its costly existence it must be used, and in the very act of using it the press creates a breathlessness and urgency and chaos that makes straight reporting all but impossible.

In the "D-Day" syndrome, regular correspondents become war correspondents. In Iowa, UPI's Stewart Hensley filed stories via walkie-talkie radio from the front lines of a sorghum field, drowning out much of the dialogue between Khrushchev and Garst with a series of "And now the Soviet premier is walking slowly to an ensilage pit. Can you read me? Over." Motorcades are escorted not only by military police but by a fleet of hot-rod crash-helmeted motorcyclists who pick up copy and film from press cars at eighty miles an hour and then peel off for their home offices. Railroad-station platforms become emergency communications centers, specially equipped to speed news from Trenton, New Jersey, or Salinas, California, as far as Paris and Milan. At war-like canteens everywhere, reporters gather over coffee and doughnuts to relate their latest exploits, like pilots refighting air battles with their hands. Elaborate plans are laid for every contingency. One reporter spent five hours in the Seventy-ninth Street station of the Eighth Avenue subway